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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000699

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: REPORT ON STAFFDEL FEBRUARY 18-20

REF: CARACAS 03674

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)  
) AND (D)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) House Western Hemisphere Subcommittee staff members met with opposition and government leaders, members of the National Assembly, and the UNHCR representative in Caracas February 18-20. Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel emphasized the importance of maintaining a good Venezuelan-U.S. bilateral relationship despite the flare up of occasional conflicts. Opposition leaders told staffers the GOV was only nominally a democracy, but acknowledged the success of Chavez's social programs. OAS and Carter Center representatives said the government-allied CNE majority had rejected their proposal for verifying individuals' signatures using a statistically random sampling of the disputed petition forms. The UNHCR representative explained to staffers that the GOV needs to rapidly improve its application process in order to deal with its growing Colombian refugee population. Staffers also discussed the work of the "Boston Group" and pledged to continue plans for establishing a TV channel for the National Assembly. END SUMMARY.

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MEETING WITH THE G-5  
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2. DCM hosted dinner for Caleb McCarry, Staff Director Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, Jessica Lewis, Democratic Staff Director Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, and Paul Oostburg Sanz, Deputy Democratic Chief Counsel with leaders of the opposition: Enrique Mendoza (head of the Democratic Coordinating Committee and Governor of Miranda State), Henrique Salas Romer (Proyecto Venezuela), Henry Ramos Allup (Secretary General of Accion Democratica), and Juan Fernandez (Gente de Petroleo). The leaders characterized the GOV as a dictatorship in fact, with the cover of a constitution. Ramos said the international community does not understand that when a Venezuelan institution takes an action or makes a decision (such as the National Electoral Council), that it is typically subordinated to revolutionary politics. The leaders agreed that the GOV's social programs have been very successful, especially Mision Robinson (literacy), Mision Barrio Adentro (medical services), and the Mercals (subsidized food products).

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THE GOV'S MESSAGE  
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3. (C) The Staffers and Ambassador met February 19 with Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel. The Vice President underscored the necessity for Venezuela and the United States to maintain a good bilateral relationship, despite occasional conflicts. He pointed out that the U.S. needs regional and Venezuelan support to achieve its foreign policy goals and vice-versa. He urged continued focus on the big picture in order to overcome any problems. Rangel warned against misunderstanding Venezuela's purpose, which is not to become another Cuba, but to address long-standing problems in the country. He noted that Cuban doctors established in other countries, such as Guatemala, do not draw the same criticism as those working in Venezuela and denied any political purpose to the project. McCarry responded that the USG remains concerned about the extent of the Cuban government's role in Venezuelan policies.

4. (C) The Ambassador questioned Rangel about developments in the CNE. The Vice President reiterated the government's message about the existence of major fraud. He agreed that the OAS and the Carter Center played a beneficial role as observers but stressed that the CNE's opinion of the process must take precedence over the opinion of international organizations. Rangel accused WHA DAS Peter DeShazo of giving more weight to the opinion of the OAS and Carter Center over that of the CNE during his recent visit to

Venezuela and warned against this interpretation of the process. Ambassador conveyed the USG's view that through their presence the OAS and the Carter Center lend credibility to an institution which, as Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez\_ had

stated, has none. While the CNE has the legal authority to make this decision, the OAS and Carter Center observers' views were of great importance. McCarry added the U.S. Congress's concurrence with Ambassador's points.

15. (C) In a separate meeting, Deputy Foreign Minister Arevalo Mendez and pro-government National Assembly member Luis Tascon told staffers and Ambassador that they had proof of extensive fraud in the Presidential recall referendum signature collection. Tascon cited a few examples, but claimed to have 20,000 testimonials from individuals explaining how their names were fraudulently used. Tascon also alleged 60,000 forms were handed out on the four mornings of the signature drive and not returned in the evenings of the same day, in violation of the rules. Mendez expressed their conviction that President Chavez has already won the 2006 election and that official candidates will win governorships in Miranda, Anzoategui and Zulia. Mendez went on to say that since democracy is best expressed in elections and electoral processes, Venezuela currently has the strongest democracy in the world.

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VIEWS FROM OAS & CARTER CENTER  
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16. (C) Ambassador hosted a meeting in which OAS country representative Patricio Carbacho and Carter Center representative Francisco Diez gave staffers their assessment of progress in the National Electoral Council (CNE). Diez offered a more pessimistic view of the situation, saying he saw no hope for an acceptable CNE decision on the question of fraudulent signatures. Carbacho told staffers he was optimistic that the CNE would be able to successfully mount a system for validating any challenged signatures. Diez and Carbacho said they had proposed contacting individuals in a random sampling of the challenged population of petition forms ("planillas planas") to verify their signatures. The CNE directors rejected this proposed statistical sampling. Diez noted that the directors were also considering obtaining national identification information through the banking system.

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BOSTON GROUP FIRMS PLANS FOR VENEZUELAN C-SPAN  
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17. (SBU) Staffers met with Venezuelan Boston Group organizers Pedro Diaz Blum (Proyecto Venezuela) and Calixto Ortega (Fifth Republic Movement) and other members of the group to discuss ongoing plans for establishing a TV channel with continuous live broadcasting from the National Assembly (ref A). The members agreed to move forward with the project and to schedule another meeting on the topic with Representatives Cass Ballenger (R-NC), Bill Delahunt (D-MA) and Gregory Meeks (D-NY) for early May, 2004 in Venezuela. In response to a request from Ortega, McCarry explained the mechanics of NED project funding, emphasizing the organization's bipartisan support within the U.S. After debating the topic, the group members agreed to refrain from making any public statements about GOV accusations that the USG is spending millions of dollars to assist opposition groups since it might affect the Boston Group's own existence. In response to McCarry's outline of the proposed Boston Group television project, Rangel promised support and resources.

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A DIFFERENT CHAVISTA VIEW  
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18. (C) DCM also hosted dinner for staffdel with five Chavista leaders, only one of whom attended, Ibrain Velasquez, Assembly deputy from Margarita Island. Velasquez told staffers the political split among the different parties is so wide that cooperation and compromise are almost impossible. The pro-Chavez deputy said he does not think the referendum will happen and asserted that there was mega fraud in the signature collection. Ambassador and DCM asked why no statements were issued at the time of collection, to which Velasquez replied that no one had anticipated it as a problem. He claimed that signature forms were not promptly returned because they were taken to "laboratories" to be fraudulently filled out. He stressed that only a technical solution to the problems in the CNE offered an acceptable resolution to the recall process. According to Velasquez, in a yes/no vote, the President would win if an election were

called right now. However, the government will not call for an election because it is unwilling to accept the conditions which the opposition would insist on.

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ON THE TOPIC OF REFUGEES  
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19. (C) Staffdel McCarry met February 20 with Virginia Trimarco, the Caracas-based regional representative for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to discuss the extent of the refugee problem in Venezuela, the GOV response, and UNHCR's role. Trimarco explained to the delegation that historically Venezuela did not have large numbers of refugees and therefore had no system in place for processing them. Also, movement across the border in both directions has always been very fluid, which wasn't a problem until a few years ago when large numbers of Colombians began to enter Venezuela and stay. The number of applicants for refugee status is large and growing due to guerrilla violence and drug trafficking. Trimarco estimates that there are 150,000 Colombians in the Western Venezuelan states; Zulia, Tachira and Apure. UNHCR vets applicants in conjunction with security forces to weed out known criminals, but the security forces need training in this area. Trimarco told the staffers her office had sent VP Rangel a letter explaining the refugee situation, and emphasizing the dire need for improved personal ID documents issued by the Venezuelan state. She also stressed the need for the Commission to establish clear rules for the process of vetting refugee applicants.  
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